

## Families First Community Advisory Board

Date: Thursday, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2025

Time: 1:00 PM CST

Location: Tennessee Tower, Nashville, TN

---

### Board Members Present:

- Commissioner Clarence Carter
- Jamie Stitt (Designee for Commissioner McWhorter)
- Jack Bailey
- Britney Cleveland
- Rachael Corry
- Dr. Jerry Askew
- Annie Cacheiro

### Board Members Absent:

- Ashleigh McFadden (Designee for Commissioner Reynolds)
- Steven Gentile
- Bishop Edward Stephens
- Dr. Tobi Amosun (Designee for Commissioner Dunn)
- Commissioner Deneice Thomas
- Chairman Bo Watson
- Leader Raumesh Akbari
- Chairman Brock Martin
- Chairman Bryan Terry
- Frank Lawrence
- Elizabeth Fournet
- Executive Jim Mangubat

---

## Agenda Items and Notes:

### 1:05 PM

#### Welcome and Commissioner's Update

*Presenter:* Commissioner Carter

*Key Points Discussed:*

- Commissioner Carter opened the meeting, welcoming both in-person and virtual attendees. He commended the board and pilot partners for their continued dedication and remarked that the group was 'rounding into the home stretch' of their multi-year efforts.
- He emphasized that Tennessee's work has become a national model for TANF innovation, noting that several other states and organizations regularly reach out to DHS to learn from Tennessee's approach. Commissioner described the Department's vision to create a 'glide path' forward rather than a hard stop for pilot operations,

preserving service continuity for families while transitioning toward the next phase of program development.

---

## **1:09 PM**

### **Post-TOPI Plans**

*Presenter:* Suzanne Carr

*Key Points Discussed:*

- Suzanne Carr presented the Post-TOPI Strategy Proposal, outlining DHS's plan to ensure a smooth transition when the current pilot contracts end in October 2026. This will include new contracts, and a future competitive grant program.
  - Commissioner Carter reiterated that this transition plan represents a deliberate glide path that protects both families and grantees from an abrupt end to services. He noted the significant planning and balancing of pressures that went into crafting the proposal.
  - Dr. Jerry Askew raised a strategic concern about the 2026 election transition, urging DHS to proactively prepare incoming state leadership and legislators to preserve momentum. Commissioner Carter responded that the Chief of Staff is preparing a comprehensive transition document for the next administration, ensuring the TOA initiative and pilot lessons are prominently featured.
  - Suzanne also confirmed that the legislative team has been in contact with key lawmakers, who have expressed support for the proposed plan.
- 

## **1:29 PM**

### **Enrollment Status & Goals**

*Presenter:* Jessica White, PCG

*Key Points Discussed:*

- Jessica White provided an update on pilot enrollment progress and related technical assistance.
  - 9,216 families have been enrolled across all pilot sites to date.
  - Each pilot has exceeded its original research target, with notable highlights:
    - Affirm: Goal 700 → 1,048 enrolled
    - Family & Children's Service: Goal 1,500 → 2,035 enrolled
    - First Tennessee: Goal 700 → 835 enrolled
    - Martha O'Bryan Center: Goal 730 → 1,300 enrolled
    - United Way: Goal 600 → 825 enrolled
    - Upper Cumberland: Goal 700 → 829 enrolled
    - University of Memphis: Goal 700 → 2,344 enrolled
-

**1:33 PM**

### **Internal Evaluation Primer**

*Presenters:* Ashweeta Patnaik, MEF Associates

*Key Points Discussed:*

- Ashweeta presented an overview of MEF's evaluation framework, focusing on how their randomized controlled study measures *impact* (program-caused changes) versus *outcomes* (observed results).
  - Key distinctions she highlighted:
    - MEF uses state administrative data (from TDHS, TDLWD, and P-20 systems) to ensure robust tracking beyond pilot MIS data.
    - MEF measures at consistent time intervals (e.g., 12-or-18 months post-entry) to ensure fairness.
    - MEF's *intent-to-treat* approach includes all enrolled participants, even those who did not complete services, to capture the full picture.
  - Commissioner Carter commended MEF's work, emphasizing that this is the first time TDHS has invested its own funds to measure true program impact. He explained that federal TANF funds could not be used for this type of evaluation, underscoring Tennessee's commitment to building an evidence-based human services model
- 

**1:40 PM**

### **Preliminary Data from UCHRA's Internal Data Team**

*Presenters:* Megan Spurgeon

*Key Points Discussed:*

- Megan shared detailed findings from UCHRA's internal data and the Empower Upper Cumberland collective impact initiative.
- Key Data and Outcomes:
  - 829 families served, representing roughly 3,000 individuals.
  - 72% of families are single-parent households.
  - 75 families have reached 225% of the Federal Poverty Level (FPL) the program's benchmark for economic self-sufficiency.
  - Combined, those 75 families achieved \$2.4 million in new earned income, \$744,000 in TennCare cost avoidance, and \$183,000 in new payroll taxes, contributing to a projected \$24.3 million in lifetime taxpayer savings.
- Megan also described UCHRA's implementation of the Heckman Equation to quantify long-term public benefit and the introduction of trauma-informed, milestone-based incentives. Over \$600,000 of the \$1.2 million in family assistance has been distributed as *earned milestone payments*.
- Additional outcomes included:
  - Average household income increases of \$16,000 annually among 320 families.
  - 205 families engaged in education (GEDs, certifications, or degrees).

- Families advancing from minimum-wage to professional roles in health care, manufacturing, and education.
- Documented improvements in mental health, confidence, housing stability, and financial literacy.
- 98% of families said they would recommend Empower to a friend, and 81% reported greater financial confidence.
- Commissioner Carter praised the presentation as '*groundbreaking*,' noting that Empower's trauma-informed, personalized navigation model demonstrates how public support systems can be redesigned to promote progress rather than penalize it.

---

**2:06 PM**

**Concluding Remarks**

*Presenter:* Suzanne Carr

*Key Points Discussed:*

- Suzanne and Commissioner Carter closed the meeting by thanking the board, partners, and pilot teams for their dedication to Tennessee families. Carter reflected that while the implementation details had been challenging, the real impact stories now emerging affirm that 'we have created the enabling conditions for life-changing results.'
- He concluded by encouraging members to continue offering feedback as the Department refines its transition and sustainability plans in the coming year.
- Next meeting is scheduled for Thursday, January 15, 2026.